

# Encounters with the Past HISTORY FLOWS ON THE CHICKAHOMINY RIVER

In the fall of 1607, with no food stored at Jamestown for the winter, Captain John Smith began a series of trips to Chickahominy towns to trade for corn. In October and November, he and a crew took the *Discovery Barge* up the river three times, exploring and mapping as they went. The Chickahominy people received them well and traded baskets of corn for copper pots, blue beads, and other manufactured items. On a fourth trip, in December, Smith left the *Discovery Barge* and most of his crew at Appocant (near today's Providence Forge), the uppermost town to which the vessel could navigate, and hired a Chickahominy Indian guide with a canoe to take him and two crew members further upriver.

Well up into Chickahominy Swamp, they ran into a hunting party led by Opechancanough, the war chief of the paramount chief Powhatan and the leader of the Youghtanund Indians on the nearby Pamunkey River. The hunters killed both crewmen and captured Smith. Opechancanough held Smith captive for six weeks, marching him around much of the region and over the rivers between the Chickahominy and the Rappahannock, before taking him to Powhatan's headquarters at Werowocomoco on what is now the York River. There he met Powhatan, to whom many of the Virginia Algonquian tribes paid tribute in exchange for military protection and foodsharing. According to Smith's later writings, Powhatan spared Smith's life at the urging of his daughter Pocahontas, a story now generally disputed by scholars. Powhatan eventually released Smith to return to Jamestown. During his captivity Smith learned some of the Virginia Algonquian language, as well as the ways of life of the Indians and the geography of the region—knowledge which would serve him well over the next two years.

#### **EXPLORING THE CHICKAHOMINY TODAY**

The Chickahominy River rises in a bottomland hardwood swamp north of Richmond and flows east halfway to Williamsburg before turning south to enter the James River about six miles above Jamestown Island. Even though the river lies in the fast-developing corridor between Williamsburg and Richmond, and Interstate 64 crosses its upper reaches in several places, much of it still looks as it did in Captain John Smith's time. Members of the Chickahominy and Eastern Chickahominy Indian tribes still live in the area.

The lower 18 miles of the river are tidal, flanked by cypress trees and broad marshes of wild rice and other freshwater plants. Multiple deep creeks flow into this section from both the east (James City County) and west (Charles City County) sides. Along much of the river, wetlands prevent or minimize waterfront development, though there are several sections on the James City side that are heavily built up. In other sections of the river and up most of the creeks, it is fun to study the shorelines, try to figure out where the Indian towns were, and then compare what you see with Smith's map.

As you explore, you'll understand more about how the Chickahominy people lived then. This river is still full of fish, especially largemouth bass and blue catfish. The cypress trees offer both perches and nest structures for ospreys

# FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION Chesapeake Bay Gateways

The Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail is part of a much larger story of the Chesapeake Bay—a story with rich historical, natural, and environmental chapters for your discovery and enjoyment. Throughout the Bay watershed a variety of parks, wildlife refuges, maritime museums, historic sites, and trails tell their part of the Chesapeake story. These special places are part of the National Park Service Chesapeake Bay Gateways and Watertrails Network. Visit them to experience the authentic Chesapeake.

Many of these Gateways to the Chesapeake are located along the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail. Those with boating access to the water trail are noted throughout this Boater's Guide. Others await your exploration by land. You can make virtual visits via the Gateway Network's website at www.baygateways.net where you can find sites by name, location, activities, or themes. As you travel the Chickahominy River, learn more about important Chesapeake connections at the following Gateway sites and attractions.

## CHESAPEAKE GATEWAYS ALONG THE CHICKAHOMINY RIVER

Chickahominy Riverfront Park • Williamsburg, VA

Chickahominy Water Trail • Richmond, VA

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Cypress trees along the Chickahominy River. PHOTO BY STARKE JETT

#### **RESOURCES&CONTACTS**

CHICKAHOMINY WATER TRAIL AND GUIDE MAP 804-788-8811

www.jamesriverassociation.org

VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF GAME AND INLAND FISHERIES

www.dgif.virginia.gov (search by river)

CHICKAHOMINY WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA www.dgif.virginia.gov/wmas/detail.asp?pid=1

and bald eagles, while the seed-producing plants in the marshes provide food for waterfowl. Songbirds nest in the woods, river otters fish the waters, and muskrats live in the marshes. Throughout the seasons, there is still plenty to see and do here.

The head of tide is Walker's Dam, built at Lanexa in 1939 to impound the upper river and form what is now referred to as Chickahominy Lake. Its lower reaches are slow-moving, wide, and shallow, with small creeks made to order for exploring in canoes, kayaks, and 14- to 16-foot outboard skiffs. Keep an eye out for ospreys, eagles, herons, and waterfowl. Pick up a Virginia freshwater fishing license and try for bass, chain pickerel, bream (bluegills), crappies, and catfish.

## **Good Vessels for Exploring**



Canoes and kayaks are excellent for exploring virtually all of the Chickahominy, including Morris, Gordons, and Nettles creeks. Be aware that the open Chickahominy is a big river that can funnel wind and kick up rough, especially in the broad lower sections.



Outboard skiffs and runabouts of 14 to 20 feet in length are great for exploring the Chickahominy and the creeks. Skippers of these boats should carry push-poles to allow nosing into a marsh edge or two. Be aware that some open water is very shallow. Nayces Bay between Gordons and Nettles creeks is a prime example. Also, note that the channel at the mouth of Morris Creek lies against the south side, with a very shallow flat to the north.



Cruising powerboats and sailboats with mast heights of less than 52 feet can easily explore the Chickahominy River. Note that the channel can be narrow, and winds can be fluky. Big boats equipped with kayaks or dinghies can base at River's Rest and enjoy further exploration from there.



PHOTO BY PAULA DEGEN

Chickahominy Riverfront Park overlooks the confluence of Gordons Creek and the Chickahominy River. Bring your own boat or rent canoes/kayaks at the park.

## **Trip Itineraries**

#### **GORDONS AND NETTLES CREEKS CIRCUMNAVIGATION, ABOUT 7 MILES**



If paddling, launch at Chickahominy Riverfront Park and paddle up Gordons Creek, around the tip of Gordons Island, down Nettles Creek to the river's main stem, and back into the mouth of Gordons Creek to the ramp. If possible, pick a day when the tide will be high at noon, so you can follow the ebb upstream in the morning and the ebb back down in the afternoon.

Be sure to explore some of the side creeks on either side of the island, except during waterfowl hunting season when you should avoid the side creeks and duck blinds. Check with Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (www.dgif/hunting/waterfowl) for hunting season dates. Note: Gordons Island belongs to a private hunt club and is posted against trespass.

Don't attempt this itinerary in cold weather or windy conditions, as the river can get quite rough and the creeks tend to funnel wind. Under those conditions, opt for a short out-and-back exploration of Gordons Creek. You'll still find plenty to see.

#### **MORRIS CREEK** TWO-WAY, ABOUT 4 MILES



The Chickahominy Wildlife Management Area offers several walking trails and a good boat ramp on this lovely, heavily-wooded creek. Paddle craft and smaller powerboats can explore in both directions. If headed out to the river under power, be sure to hug the south bank at the mouth to stay in the deepest water.

#### **BIG MARSH POINT CIRCUMNAVIGATION ABOUT 1.5 MILES**



Launch at River's Rest Marina to paddle or run around the Big Marsh across and just downstream of the landing. Note the direction of the tidal current and plan your itinerary accordingly. The cut through the marsh opposite River's Rest is plenty deep enough for skiffs but not for cruising boats. If you're in the latter, use your dinghy.

Captain Smith mapped the village of Werawehon on the peninsula at the base of the marsh. The high land where River's Rest now sits was probably a "suburb."

## **TRAILHEADS** ON THE CHICKAHOMINY RIVER

#### **CHICKAHOMINY RIVER (TIDAL)**

**Chickahominy Riverfront Park** 37° 16' 06" N, 76° 52' 21" W 757-258-5020



www.jccegov.com/recreation/parks-trails/chickahominy-park.html

Morris Creek 37° 18' 00" N, 76 ° 53' 57" W





www.dgif.virginia.gov/boating/access/?filtertype=fips&fips=036,

37° 21' 46" N, 76° 54' 45" W 804-829-2753, www.riversrest.com









## **For Cruising Boats**

### TRAVELING ALONG THE CHICKAHOMINY RIVER

Whether you're in a skiff or a large boat, travel the main stem from the mouth of the Chickahominy up to Walker's Dam to see how the river develops in its run from the dam to the James River. Your depth sounder will show you some very deep water, indicative of how much power the river has, and how much land it drains.

If you're in a skiff or dinghy, be sure to explore Shipyard and Yarmouth creeks, which meet to form one waterway east of Wright's Island.

Watch the transitions from high banks to marshes as the Chickahominy River meanders back and forth. The outsides of the curves formed important landings used by the Indians and later the English. One particularly interesting spot is on the James City bank just above Wright's Island and Shipyard Creek. The creek is named for this landing, which was a Confederate shipyard burned in 1862 during the Civil War. This spot later served as a fish house where watermen landed their catch, and most recently it served as part of the set for the movie *The New* World, which is loosely based on the stories of Captain John Smith and Pocahontas. The plot retells the old legend rather than the history, but cinematography of the Chickahominy is excellent.

**NOTE:** Trailheads indicate access points for the suggested itineraries. River maps indicate trailheads as either private or public. All launch sites are open to the public. Those listed as private are part of privately owned businesses. Public trailheads are located on local, state, or federally managed properties. Fees may be charged at any of the launch sites and are subject to change. Contact the site directly for the latest information

# EXPLORING THE WESTERN SHORE Chickahominy River TRAILHEAD (PUBLIC) TRAILHEAD (PRIVATE) TRIP ITINERARY River's Rest **LINKS TO ONLINE MAPS CLICK SOURCE** ▼ Chickahominy Riverfront Park GOOGLE NOAA GOOGLE NOAA GOOGLE NOAA **WILLIAMSBURG Morris Creek** Chickahominy

Riverfront Park

NOT FOR NAVIGATION NOT TO SCALE

### THE CHICKAHOMINY RIVER

